

THE AESOPIC FABLE IN ANCIENT RHETORICAL
THEORY AND PRACTICE

BY

RUTH STAFFORD KOVACS

A.B., University of Illinois, 1941

M.A., University of Illinois, 1942

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN CLASSICS
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1950

URBANA, ILLINOIS
1950

THE AESOPIC FABLE IN ANCIENT RHETORICAL
THEORY AND PRACTICE

BY

RUTH STAFFORD KOVACS

A.B., University of Illinois, 1941

M.A., University of Illinois, 1942

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN CLASSICS
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1950

URBANA, ILLINOIS

1950

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

It has been my privilege to study, in all, some seven years under Professor Ben Edwin Perry, whose fine thoroughness and patience, integrity and completeness of scholarship will prove an abiding inspiration for a deepening personal cultivation. It was he who proposed to me the topic of this investigation, and he has helped me throughout in the preparation of it with much suggestion and criticism.



THE AESOPIC FABLE IN ANCIENT RHETORICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

In this dissertation we propose to set forth to the best of our ability, in the light of the evidence that we have at our disposal, the actual use made of Aesopic fables in the classical and the Hellenistic-Roman periods, and the theory that grew up in later antiquity concerning the fable and its use. By so doing, we hope to clarify the understanding of this matter and at the same time to refute a number of dubious theories concerning the fable and the fable collections which we possess today, theories that have been promulgated in recent years through the very omission of such an inquiry. One of the more questionable conjectures, and the one with which we are most concerned, is that asserted most recently by the latest editor of the Teubner text of the Aesopic fables, August Hausrath, namely, that the texts of the Aesopic fables in our ancient collections had their origin in exercises written by schoolboys and their masters in the schools of rhetoric. Hausrath and others, at the same time, assumed or implied that the classical Greek fables were sheer folklore, that the use and manipulation of the fables described by the later rhetoricians represent something unclassical and essentially different from the practice of the early users of the fables, and that the fables were collected early into a folk-book. Again, fables are often thought to be *for* children, a misconception, widely spread, which has been fostered by a passage in Quintilian (*Inst. Orat.* i. ix.), though a later passage (*Ibid.*, v. xi. 19-22) indicates the nature of the use of the fable in public life. Our study, we hope, may serve as a corrective to these false and popular notions, although the real truth has long been known to such scholars as Aristotle and Lessing.

Hausrath refers to one of his former articles, "Das Problem der äsopischen Fabeln", as offering detailed substantiation of his theory concerning the origin of the fable texts. In this article, after summarizing the precepts for the use of fables in rhetorical compositions laid down by the rhetoricians, particularly by Theon in his *Progymnasmata*, Hausrath proceeds to point out illustrations of these precepts

in the fables of Halm's edition, with the implication that these precepts were put into practice by all the different scribes who propagated our Aesop manuscripts. He has, however, chosen fables mainly from the contexts of ancient authors, whose fables are often excerpted by Halm, and from the rhetoricians, including Aphthonius, who is rhetorically more affected than the authors of the anonymous prose collections. If Hausrath's contention was to prove anything about the origin of the fable texts, he would necessarily have had to compare the recensions of the Aesopic fables in a detailed manner, and he would have had to find in the collections, not in the contexts of Greek writers, the types of exercises recommended by the rhetoricians. This he has not done. Let us, however, turn to an examination of the practice and the theory of the fable during the classical and the Roman-Hellenistic periods.

No collection of fables known to antedate the first century after Christ has come down to us, and there is real evidence for only one collection of fables before this date, namely, the prose collection which was compiled by Demetrius of Phalerum. Fables, however, are found related incidentally in poetry, history, and philosophy before the time of Demetrius. From a survey of these fables, including those preserved in extant classical literature and those attributed to Aesop in a biography of him, it is obvious that the real purpose of the fable in classical times was to provide an apt illustration, as, indeed, many scholars have realized, among them, Lessing and Otto Keller. The major part of the fables, moreover, are explicitly and directly applied to the circumstances in which they occur, and, in many of the fables, in addition, there are examples of the techniques that were to be formulated as such centuries later by rhetoricians who sought to describe and classify the best means of adapting the fables to given contexts.

This use of the fable in the classical period conforms to the earliest rhetorical theory. Aristotle, in his *Rhetorica* (II, 20) defines the fable as essentially a rhetorical device to be employed for the purpose of

giving point and force to some argument or idea. It was a form of suasion that could be used in any field of rhetoric. He implies, moreover, that it does not matter whether a fable so used is genuine, in the sense that it existed in popular lore, or whether it is the merest sophistic invention, made up artificially by the writer or speaker following the pattern of what he wished to say. It is, in fact, easier to invent a fable, than to draw it from a substratum of folklore.

Demetrius of Phalerum compiled the first known collection of Aesopic fables *circa* 300 B.C. An orator himself, and the intellectual heir of the Aristotelian theory of rhetoric, Demetrius must have considered the fable, not as literature in itself, although Hausrath has suggested that such was the nature of an hypothetical collection of fables made as early as the fifth century before Christ, but only as a rhetorical device, as Aristotle himself had posited and the whole tradition of the fable had indicated. It is probable, then, that this collection of fables, as was true of collections of epigrams, of proverbs, and of witty sayings of wise men, was made as a reference work for orators and writers. Hausrath, though his two isolated facts do not support his supposition, has asserted that Demetrius made this collection only for the purposes of folklore. His contention is further impugned by new evidence that has been made available since 1937, concerning the nature of the first extant collection.

This important collection, extant in the Rylands papyrus 493, is dated by its editor, C. H. Roberts, in the first century after Christ, thus antedating by many centuries the oldest manuscripts of the Augustana recension. The form of the fables differs here from the form of the fables in later manuscripts, in that each fable in the papyrus begins with a promythium, a short sentence stating the purpose of the fable, as in the lines: "To a rich and rascally man, the following fable is applicable." The first line of the promythium always projects into the margin, so as to be distinguishable from the fable proper, and the first words form a sort of index of application. These two facts seem to

indicate the nature of this, our earliest collection of Aesopic fables: it must have been compiled as a reference work for writers and speakers. A statement of a later rhetorician, who may have been Aphthonius, indicates that the purpose of the collections of Aesopic fables was as reference works for those engaged in public life.

The *Progymnasmata* of the rhetoricians, Theon, Hermogenes, Aphthonius, and Nikolaus, rhetoricians living from the first through the fifth centuries after Christ, were textbooks of rhetoric, consisting of preliminary exercises in advanced creative composition. Each *Progymnasmata* includes chapters with occasional illustrations on how to use in a speech or an essay the fable, the story, the pithy anecdote, the commonplace, and certain other rhetorical devices. Theon states that his purpose in writing the *Progymnasmata* was to train those who planned to become orators or writers. Several scholiasts, moreover, on the Aphthonian *Progymnasmata* indicate more graphically the relationship between these preliminary exercises and the full-grown art of the orator: "Of these, the fable, the pithy anecdote, the opinion are forms of advisory speech, etc." Theon and the other rhetoricians cite only from the context of classical authors, and at no time suggest that the student turn to a collection of fables, as Hausrath has suggested. The students of each of the rhetoricians were to practice different ways of presenting a fable in their contexts, weaving fables into a context, fitting fables to different points in a context, lengthening or abbreviating a fable as their contexts demanded, and refuting a fable if it were not apt. All these prescriptions for the best handling of a fable merely formulated the normal and natural stylistic and narrative usage of generations of classical authors.

This practice does not suffer any major changes, as we discover from a survey of the fables of this period, in the works of the Roman and the Hellenistic writers and speakers. If, then, we judge from the evidence, the prose fable in both the classical the Hellenistic-Roman periods was always a rhetorical device, a mere illustration in some

context. There was no real contrast, in regard to the purpose for which a fable was used, or even in regard to the characteristic fable types, between the earliest and most genuine fable and the fables that were used by the later rhetoricians, for while a fable may have been told originally for the sake of the story, it can appear in literature only as an explanatory or hortatory device. A fable might be drawn from a substratum of folklore, or be invented at the moment by a writer or a speaker in need of an illustration, but either fable was employed exclusively to illustrate an idea, and did not differ essentially from the other. The practice of the fable in literature is confirmed by the theory of Aristotle and the later rhetoricians in the Hellenistic and the Roman periods. This clear statement of the practice and the theory of the fable, we think, clears up such misunderstandings as those that the classical fables were sheer folklore, that the use of the fables as a means to instruct represents a corruption of their pristine quality, that the manipulation of the fables described by later rhetoricians represents something unclassical and essentially different from the practice of early users of the fable, and that the fables were for children primarily.

Let us turn, however, to the manuscripts of the Aesopic fables and examine them in the light of the rhetorical prescriptions. For this purpose we may use Chambry's edition of the Aesopic fables. We discover in comparing the readings of the fables in the Augustana group of manuscripts with one another that the variants consist of substitutions of synonyms, the use of clauses for phrases, the use of adverbs for phrases, paraphrase, and the inversion of word order. Again, if we examine the manuscripts of the Vindobonensis group, we find that it is no more the result of schoolboy manipulation than was the Augustana group. If, moreover, we compare the Augustana group with the Vindobonensis group of manuscripts, there is still no indication that the prescriptions of the rhetoricians were being practiced. Thus the theory that Hausrath has so long held concerning the origin of the fable texts stands refuted.

VITA

Ruth Kovacs, formerly Ruth Cundiff Doss Stafford, was born on May 7, 1915, in Marion, Illinois. In 1937, four years after being graduated from Springfield High School at Springfield, Illinois, she entered the University of Illinois and received the degree of Bachelor of Arts, with highest honors in Greek, from that institution in June, 1941. Two years, however, of that period were spent at home because of illness. In October, 1942, she received the degree of Master of Arts. She held a University Fellowship from September, 1943, to June, 1944, and from September, 1945, to June, 1946. She was married in November, 1943, and was again away from the university from September, 1944, to June, 1945, because of illness. In June, 1946, she joined her husband in Pasadena, California, where he was attending the Pasadena Playhouse, and during that time she bore two children. At present, she is working as an assistant librarian at Illinois College Library in Jacksonville, Illinois.

She did graduate work in the Department of Classics under Professors Henry Gomperz, L. E. Lord, W. A. Oldfather, R. P. Oliver, B. E. Perry, H. A. Sanders, and Alexander Turyn, and in the Department of English, under Professor T. W. Baldwin.

